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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000701

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN OPPOSITION LEADER ON HIS STRUGGLE WITH
CANCER AND FOR POLITICAL CHANGE

REF: DAMASCUS 0628

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.4 b/d

11. (C) Summary: On July 3, prominent Syrian opposition leader Riad Seif provided an update on his unsuccessful efforts so far to obtain permission to travel overseas for treatment of his prostate cancer, including his meetings with a Syrian VP and intelligence chiefs. He observed that the relatively friendly manner in which he has been greeted by SARG officials indicates that the SARG may be seeking a deal with Seif in exchange for his silence. The 61-year-old Seif expressed anger at his illness, given his efforts to enlarge the Damascus Declaration (DD) group that he leads into a 180-person National Congress by as early as September. While we agree with Seif's assessment that the SARG may be exploring avenues to exploit Seif's illness for a political deal, we doubt the regime will allow the charismatic Seif to leave the country out of fear that he would speak freely and raise funds. End Summary.

12. (C) SEEKING OVERSEAS TREATMENT FOR PROSTATE CANCER: In a July 3 meeting with A/DCM and Poloff, prominent Syrian opposition leader Riad Seif provided an update on his efforts to obtain SARG permission to travel to Germany for treatment of his prostate cancer as reported in reftel. Seif said that he started the process three weeks earlier with a phone call to the General Intelligence Directorate (GID) head of internal security Fouad Nassif Kheirbek, who greeted him in a friendly manner and said he had been wanting to meet Seif. Subsequently, Seif met with one of Syria's two vice presidents (the vastly less influential one) Najah al-Attar to seek her influence with Syrian President Bashar al Asad.

13. (C) Shortly after the Attar meeting, head of Syrian GID chief Ali Mamluk called Seif, requesting a meeting and a copy of his doctor's recommendation that he seek treatment outside Syria, Seif said. The hour-long Mamluk meeting was "very friendly," Seif said. Mamluk welcomed him and said that the political opposition is "a must" in every country--to which Seif observed that the stronger the opposition, the wealthier the country. Mamluk responded that Syria was "wanted by America" and hence had to exercise caution in allowing openings for increased political opposition. Seif said he retorted that he had a different opinion and that Syria's main mistake of the last decade was not knowing how to deal with the West. Israel was an expert in dealing with the West, while Syria was the worst, said Seif, adding that as a result Syria was unable to defend itself. Mamluk suggested that the opposition should focus on combating corruption and developing the country's industrial capacities. (Comment:

Ironically, these are the issues that Seif championed during the 1990s when he was an MP and businessman, marking the beginning of his political troubles with the SARG and eventually leading to a five-year prison sentence. Now, the regime has taken up these topics--albeit in a very limited, piecemeal way--to avoid more sensitive domestic political reforms. End Comment.)

¶4. (C) Mamluk concluded their meeting by saying that the SARG would cover all costs of treatment in a Syrian hospital of Seif's choice, and Mamluk's assistant gave Seif his personal phone number, exhorting him to call anytime. After the meeting with Mamluk, Seif's Damascus-based doctor privately told him that he had been contacted by two public sector specialists who tried to persuade him to change his recommendation for treatment outside Syria. Seif told A/DCM he will continue his efforts to obtain treatment outside the country and has sent his medical reports to doctors in Germany and France for their opinions. In the meantime, he was having difficulty obtaining interim medications through Syrian pharmacies. Seif said he was not sure if, in the end, the SARG would allow him to travel, but that he thought the SARG wanted to make a deal, given their manner toward him and Seif's growing political influence among the domestic opposition. Seif said he had privately offered not to speak out politically while overseas, but so far that offer had not been accepted.

¶5. (C) EFFORTS TO EXPAND DAMASCUS DECLARATION GROUP
CONTINUE: Seif expressed anger at his illness, given his efforts to enlarge the Damascus Declaration (DD) group that he leads from a core group of about three dozen members to a 180-person National Congress. (At the same time, he quoted a

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Damascene proverb advising those planning to make war to first appear weak.) Seif said he hoped that, by the fall, and possibly as early as September, the National Congress would meet for the first time and elect a 17-member executive committee, which would draft a public political platform. In the meantime, Seif was arranging for current DD members get to know the prospective National Congress candidates at a series of receptions in Damascus and around the country. The first such reception had taken place on June 28 for 40 persons, including DD members as well as prospective National Congress candidates such as anti-violence Islamist Dr. Jowdat Said, popular Syrian actor Khalid Tajir, young and moderate Sunnis, and well-respected Alawites, Seif said. The DD group had decided not to begin work on a public statement about the Congress, in the hopes that the expanded group would be less influenced by the Arab Nationalists and other ideologues, who currently dominate DD discussions, Seif said. Particularly dogmatic were Communist Party Action chief Fateh Jammous and Socialist Union chief Hassan Abdulazeem, Seif noted.

¶6. (C) IRAQ THE REGIME'S BOGEYMAN: Seif confirmed that Syrians often cite the Iraqi conflict as boosting their tolerance for the SARG, noting that, "People say that if the regime here falls, the incoming regime could be worse. They tell themselves that they have waited more than 40 years for the Ba'ath Party to leave power and that they can wait a little longer." The DD group and the National Congress are intended to show Syrians and the international community that democratic reforms in Syria can be done in a safe, non-sectarian way, Seif said. The regime, however, continues to capitalize on the situation in Iraq to make people afraid of democracy, Seif said.

¶7. (C) ASAD'S SYRIA: Asked for his assessment of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, Seif characterized the President as "the stupid owner of a farm called Syria." He elaborated by saying that Asad, Asad's brother Maher and sister Bushra, as well as the President's brother-in-law and head of Syrian Military Intelligence Asef Shawkat, are a gang that was born into power and that sees itself as the owner of Syria. Asad had had a chance to permit the development of nascent

democratic reforms following his accession to the presidency during a period that is sometimes referred to as the Damascus Spring. "It could have absolved him of his father's sins," Seif said. Instead, Asad blocked the reforms and sent activists to prison, said Seif, who was one of those imprisoned. Asad will not give a second chance to meaningful reforms, as they would put him out of power, Seif predicted.

18. (C) Comment: We agree with Seif's assessment that the SARG may be exploring avenues to exploit Seif's illness for a political deal. At the same time, we doubt the regime will allow the charismatic Seif to leave the country for fear of the opportunities that this would afford him for political outreach and fund-raising in Western capitals. In our estimation, the regime will likely calculate that ephemeral international indignation over Seif's plight (like that expressed in the past on behalf of ailing political prisoner Aref Dalila) would be more palatable than a strengthened domestic opposition, which up until now is unfunded, weak and relatively unknown.

CORBIN